



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

Breaking Open the Word

Fourth Sunday of Advent A



Annunciation Ustyuzhskoe (from Ustyuzh)». Novgorod icon from Tretyakov Gallery (Russia). 12th c.



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2. **Blessing of an Advent Wreath**

Before your group lights the first candle of the Advent wreath, the following blessing may be prayed.

Leader: The kingdom of God is at hand.

All respond: Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Leader: Let us call to mind God's mercy and salvation as we wait in hope during the days and weeks of Advent. As we gather around this wreath let us remember God's promise to be with us until the end of time.

Scripture is read. Isaiah 9: 1-2a.

All respond: Thanks be to God.

After a time of silence, all join in prayers of intercessions and in the Lord's Prayer.

Leader: Let us ask God to bless our wreath and to bless us.

After a short silence, the leader prays:

Heavenly Father,

We praise and thank you for the great gift of your Son Jesus, the Christ.

You sent him as a Light to the nations.

You sent him to reveal your Light and Love to a world darkened by sin.

Christ is our hope and our salvation.

Upon him we place all our trust.

He is Emmanuel, the promised Messiah.

He brings wisdom and peace to a troubled world.

Lord God,

bless this wreath and

bless those who gaze upon its light in hopeful anticipation.

Come, Lord Jesus, come in haste, come!

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

The first candle is lighted.

Leader: Let us praise God, the ruler of the universe.

All respond, making the sign of the cross:

The God who made heaven and earth!

The blessing concludes with a verse from "O Come O Come, Emmanuel"

Liturgical Context

- ▶ Advent is a time not just of expectant waiting but of profound renewal.
- ▶ The cosmos joins the cries of human longing for the Christ—the One who came once in history, who comes each week in our hearts and who will come again at the end of time.
- ▶ There is a reminder of the judgment that awaits us all throughout the entire season.
- ▶ The symbolism of the Advent wreath reminds us of the tension between light and darkness. We are reminded of the darkness the earth once knew as it waited for the coming of the Light of the World—the Christ. A candle is lit each week illustrating the gradual increase of the Light that dispels the darkness.
- ▶ The Advent wreath cradles our primary symbols--wood and light. “The wood refers to the ‘living greens’ that are used to make the wreath...The wood or pine embodies the primary symbol of the cross. It is the wood of the cross which will become the sign of our salvation at Easter whereby all are saved by the ‘wood of the cross’. The four candles represent Christ, the Light of the World!”¹ Four purple candles, or three purple candles and one rose candle [for Gaudete Sunday, the Third Sunday of Advent], or four white candles may be used in the wreath.
- ▶ The Fourth Sunday moves us closer to the ultimate feast of the Incarnation. Mary and Joseph take center stage in the Gospel for this Sunday.
- ▶ Once again we remember that the new liturgical year (Year A) that began on the First Sunday of Advent echoes the voice of St. Matthew. Matthew’s audience was primarily a middle-class, Jewish Christian audience. He uses scriptural images, stories and themes familiar to a Jewish community to relate the Christ event.
- ▶ We are reminded of the importance of the liturgical year. We are reminded that the entire mystery of Christ is made manifest to us in the liturgical year and that the primary truths of Christian faith are manifested throughout the seasons.
- ▶ Advent prepares us to encounter the truth, reality and dogma of the Incarnation that we will experience at Christmas.
- ▶ We remember three comings of Christ—the Christ who came once in history, the Christ who comes each day in our hearts and the Christ who will come at the end of time.
- ▶ Salvation history is remembered and made present to us in our Advent liturgies.
- ▶ The season invites prayerful diligence as we remember what God has accomplished through his Son Jesus throughout human history, what he is doing now and what he will continue to do in our lives as we go about the business of building his kingdom on earth as we wait in joyful hope for the kingdom yet to come.

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Faith, Life
& Creed**
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¹Linda Gaupin, *Catechesis and Liturgy, Course Text. 52.*

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

Reading 1: Isaiah 7: 10-14

- ▶ The northern kingdom (Israel) was facing immanent overthrow by the Assyrians. Isaiah tells King Ahaz not to worry and to remain steadfast. The prophet is unsuccessful in his attempt to assure King Ahaz that he will be successful in keeping defeat away from the southern kingdom's borders.
- ▶ Isaiah tells Ahaz that if he would simply be patient God would provide a sign to prove all would be well.
- ▶ Ahaz refuses to listen to Isaiah but the sign was presented to Ahaz anyway.
- ▶ The sign was the birth of a child to a young woman (believed by scholars to be the son of Ahaz and Queen Hezekiah.)
- ▶ The child would be called Emmanuel (God with us) and would embody God's promise to be with them and that David's royal house would continue.
- ▶ Ahaz's refusal to listen to Isaiah did not bode well for Judah (the southern kingdom). Over the next twenty years the northern kingdom would fall and Judah's land and national image would be severely diminished.
- ▶ ***Biblical signs.*** A sign in the Old Testament was God's way of demonstrating his presence and protection. Signs were not necessarily supernatural events; a sign could be a natural human event interpreted through the lens of God's intervention in human activity.
- ▶ A sign gave authority to the prophet's proclamation. Thus, a sign is both heard by proclamation and observed by an action. A sign is not necessarily miraculous; its purpose is to ratify what was exhorted, challenged or promised by the prophet.
- ▶ Ahaz refused to listen to Isaiah. Rather than trust in God's sovereignty over him and all nations, he trusted in his own power to discern, lead and govern. His self-righteous, albeit deceptive excuse was that he dare not test the Lord God.
- ▶ The exasperated Isaiah presented a sign to the descendants of David. David's dynasty would continue—a child/king would govern in righteousness.
- ▶ Initially the child of this sign would live in a time of great distress.
- ▶ The Assyrians would decimate the land. The child, however, would be a sign that God had not abandoned them and that God would lead them from devastation to the dawning of a new day.
- ▶ It would be a time of rebirth and renewal. The faithful remnant would be rewarded on that future day. The child would assume the throne and govern righteously under the mantle of God's protection under God's authority.
- ▶ The prophet was not necessarily looking to the remote future and the eventual emergence of a messiah/king; it is very easy, however, to see how this Emmanuel sign came to be associated with those future messianic hopes.
- ▶ Another important focus for this reading takes us to the New Testament and the

use of this text by the evangelists as proof text that the infant Christ-child was indeed the long awaited Messiah foretold by the prophets. The translation used by the evangelists in the New Testament translated the word *young woman* (used in Isaiah) as *virgin* [*parthenos*].

- ▶ Isaiah was not looking to the future Messiah. His primary concern was the events at hand—God’s providential care of Judah. However, when he attached the promise that the Davidic dynasty would endure to the sign he promised, the people of Israel logically attached Isaiah’s proclamation to their hopes for a King/Messiah. Christians believed Jesus was the fulfillment of Israel’s hopes.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life. See appendix #1 for an example.

- ▶ How can this reading be a word for you today?
- ▶ What does Ahaz have in common with us today?
- ▶ In what way do you trust your own ability to manage your life rather than trust God to lead you through difficult times? Relate it to an experience in your life.
- ▶ Has God ever given you a sign in the course of the ordinary events in your life that he was with you and leading you?
- ▶ Has anyone ever spoken a prophetic word to you? In other words, has anyone ever been the voice of God that challenged, exhorted, taught or affirmed you?
- ▶ Have you ever exercised a prophetic role? Have you ever been the voice of God for someone else?
- ▶ Why are prophets so important to us in this season of Advent? What have we learned about prophets?

Second Reading: Romans 1: 1-7

- ▶ The intention of the statements of belief—the creeds- inherent in this letter was to assure the people that Paul was preaching a message that had already been handed down to them.
- ▶ Paul reminded them that Jesus was a descendent of the House of David.
- ▶ Jesus avoided that reference, as he did not want to communicate that he was Israel’s expected warrior/political Messiah.
- ▶ Evangelists of the first Church when preaching to Jews did however, utilize those prophetic references in order to prove that Jesus was indeed the long-awaited Messiah.
- ▶ If indeed, Jesus was that long awaited Messiah, he simply had to from David’s lineage.
- ▶ Paul uses this connection with David to illustrate Jesus’ humanity.

- ▶ Jesus was not only the risen Lord; he was a lowly human being, descended from another human being—the lowly King David.
- ▶ It is paradoxical that Paul uses Jesus’ Davidic descent not to stress his royalty, but the fact of his humanity.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story or reflection from his or her life.

- ▶ Where is the good news in this reading?
- ▶ Is it easier to connect with Jesus’ divinity or his humanity?
- ▶ Imagine you are living at the time of Christ. You are Jewish and have been waiting for a political Messiah. How would you respond to the Messiah that Jesus embodied?

Gospel: Matthew 1: 18-24

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?
- ▶ It is important to understand what *betrothal* meant in the culture of Jesus’ time if we are to understand the full import of today’s Gospel. It would be a mistake for us to associate it with our contemporary understanding of engagement prior to marriage.
- ▶ Betrothal simply meant that the couple’s family decided by contractual agreement for either economic or political reasons that the couple was held in reserve for each other.
- ▶ Marriage gave economic stability to the community.
- ▶ People did not marry for romantic reasons; love did not enter the equation. The fathers of the bride and groom entered into a binding contractual agreement.
- ▶ Betrothal meant that the couple entered into the process of marriage but had yet to live together.
- ▶ Joseph would have no way of knowing Mary’s condition. The women of the village, on the other hand, would be the first to know since they would have noticed that Mary no longer participated in the monthly rites of purification.

- ▶ Joseph was a decent, honorable Jew. As a law abiding Jew he was required to divorce Mary; he could not disregard her seeming transgression. She was pregnant and he was not the father.
- ▶ Joseph chose a compassionate means to fulfill the law's requirement; he decided to divorce her secretly thus avoiding her certain public shame.
- ▶ Since Joseph was not the father of the child, the honor code of the culture required that one man not take possession of another man's belongings. The baby did not belong to Joseph.
- ▶ Joseph could have had Mary stoned, but he chose an alternative path thus providing the necessary leeway for the real father to claim the child and take Mary as his wife.
- ▶ God then made Joseph privy to his saving plan thereby making him an instrument and a participant in it.
- ▶ God established both Joseph's and Jesus' honor by telling Joseph that the child would be a male child—a certain sign of God's favor. God also affirmed that the child's name would be Jesus.
- ▶ Joseph's status was enhanced simply by virtue of the fact that God would never honor a dishonorable person, thus affirming that Joseph was indeed an honorable man.
- ▶ The Joseph vignette is a reminder that God is not bound by human law. God can and often does transcend the Law when it suits his salvific purpose.
- ▶ Matthew's primary agenda in the birth narratives is to prove to his Jewish audience that Jesus **is** the long awaited Messiah; Jesus **is** a descendent from David's lineage; Jesus **is** God's Son; Jesus **is** the divine Incarnation sent to save the world. The virgin birth simply adds to the wonder and marvels of God's incredible saving works.
- ▶ Joseph was another participant in the salvation drama taking place on this very human stage. Joseph was a descendent of David, thus giving Jesus rightful claim to that heritage.
- ▶ This is not to contradict the Holy Spirit's role in the conception of Jesus. Joseph was a primary participant in the unfolding drama by naming Jesus, a role usually assigned to the women. Joseph however assumed the role thereby legally and rightfully acknowledging parentage, thus assuring Jesus' Davidic heritage.
- ▶ The Joseph sequence is a reminder of the human response to God's initiative.
- ▶ Three times Joseph was asked to do something; each time Joseph responded to God's request.
- ▶ Matthew's theology is unequivocal -- God's initiative requires an affirmative human response.
- ▶ Birth narratives throughout Scripture are always significant signs that God is engaged in his saving plan for human kind. The child in such birth events is intended to grow up to be significant actor in God's plan of salvation. Moses, saved as an infant, would one day deliver the people out of bondage in Egypt.
- ▶ Jesus the new Deliverer will not just one day save the people of Israel, but the entire world. Jesus was not only an actor in God's plan of salvation, he **WAS**

God's ultimate plan destined from the creation of the world.

- ▶ Matthew named *Jesus* (God saves), and *Emmanuel*, (God is with us), as a reminder of the implication of his mission. God is with us in the person of Jesus throughout our lives. Jesus is a tangible sign of God's revelation.
- ▶ Contemporary theologians call Jesus the *sacrament of God*. A sacrament is a tangible sign of God's presence in our lives. Jesus is that sacrament in our lives.
- ▶ Jesus invites covenant relationship with God through intimate relationship with himself.
- ▶ When human beings reject God's will, when they sin, they reject the God that dwells within them.
- ▶ Theologian Karl Rahner SJ beautifully expresses the aforementioned truth of the Incarnation: "It is both terrible and comforting to dwell in the incomprehensible nearness of God, and so to be loved by God himself that the first and last gift is infinity and incomprehensibility itself. But we have no choice. God is with us." ²
- ▶ Joseph's first response to the miraculous events unfolding before him was flight.
- ▶ God revealed his plan to him, assuring Joseph that he had a part in that plan.
- ▶ Joseph's shock turned to submission to God's will.
- ▶ All believers are to take note of Joseph's response and mirror it in their own lives.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix #2 for an example.

- ▶ What does it mean to you that Jesus is a sacrament of God? Do you have any firsthand experience of that truth in your life?
- ▶ Imagine you are Joseph. You are a law abiding Jew. You are faced with a seeming insurmountable decision. Do you follow the Law or your heart? What does this episode teach us about Joseph and our response to God's Law?
- ▶ What does it teach us about our response to God's Law?
- ▶ Joseph is an example of what our human response to God's initiative should be. When considering your life have you ever (or do you know anyone who has ever) called upon to respond to God's will against what appeared to be insurmountable obstacles?

²Karl Rahner, *GCY*, 43.

- ▶ Consider Mary's predicament. She must have been frightened by the possibilities. She knew she could be put to death for her situation, yet she persevered and trusted God's will for her. What does Mary have to teach you today in your life experiences?
- ▶ Has there ever been a situation in your life in which you could have drawn strength from Mary's example?
- ▶ The incarnation is the most significant event in salvation history. Without it there would be no Jesus, no sacred mission, no life, no passion, death or resurrection, no ascension to the Father and ultimately no sending of the Spirit. Without the Incarnation there would be no sanctification of human beings or creation. Without the Incarnation human beings would never have been elevated to the status of divine being. In light of those blessed truths, how has the Incarnation of the Christ-child, Messiah, and Savior of the world had an influence on or impacted your life?
- ▶ What are the implications of this Gospel? What is the challenge?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question.

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

CONCLUDING PRAYER

Prayer of Pope Clement XI

Lord, I believe in you: increase my faith.
 I trust in you: strengthen my trust.
 I love you: let me love you more and more.
 I am sorry for my sins: deepen my sorrow.
 I worship you as my first beginning.
 I long for you as my last end.
 I praise you as my constant helper.
 And I call you as my loving protector.
 I want to do what you ask of me:
 In the way you ask, for as long as you ask, because you ask it.
 Let me love you Lord as my God.
 And see myself as I really am: a pilgrim in this world.
 A Christian called to respect and love all those lives I touch.

OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.

APPENDIX

#1. So often I share about the greatest sorrow of my life—living with a child who is mentally ill. That one experience is my school of faith and discipleship. At times I rise to the occasion and respond to the situation in faith and at other times I fall very short. So many times I come before God asking why he remains so silent in the face of the tragic, pained life of someone I love.

God has given us so many signs that he is with us in this sorrow. But one recent sign stands out. God wants us to see beyond the sorrow and be grateful for the many blessings and the treasures he has given our family. I have three treasured grandchildren; they are light of our lives. And very soon we too will have our own Emmanuel--the sign of a child—not just one child but two children. God has doubly blessed us. My youngest daughter is expecting twin girls. This double blessing has taken our breath away and is a reminder of the gift of life and God's love for us.

An anecdote regarding our role as prophet. A few years ago I was blessed to be a voice for life when a young woman was contemplating an abortion. Partly because of my role but mostly because of her parent's unconditional love, she chose not to abort. We never know when God will call on us to be his instrument and his prophet. Our world is in desperate need for prophets. We must be attentive to the opportunities God puts before us to proclaim his word by our words and our actions.

Another anecdote regarding our role as prophet. Our parish family is a prophetic beacon in the wider community. Our parish not only preaches a just word, it lives it. An active justice-focused group works to make systemic changes in systems that oppress poor and marginalized people in our community. A social concerns office helps people with food, rent and other needs. An off-site thrift store finances the needs of poor people in our area. We are significant contributors to a homeless shelter for women with children. Our parish gives a half a million dollars a year to the world's poor people. We have built schools and clinics in Haiti and Chile and have supported projects in Appalachia. Thus the outreach is local and global. Our parish is God's voice in our time—"The poor have the Good News preached to them and extended to them." Such is the sign of the kingdom of God in our midst.

#2. Jesus is the sacrament of God (presence of God in our midst in word and sign). I discover the truth of that theological statement each and every day. I pray every day; my prayer, however, is mostly dry and seemingly unfruitful. I pray because I love God and Jesus told us we must.

In the year of Paul I spent time reflecting on the wisdom of that great apostle. What remained with me in at the end of that reflective year was the truth that Paul passed on to believers—the Christian life is not rocket science—it is simply participating in the life of Christ who dwells within each and every one of us—Emmanuel—God is with us.

As stated, I seldom experience the consolation of God in formal prayer. However, when

I am doing God's will; when I am teaching his word, when I am ministering to hurting people, when I am responding to the God who lives within, when I take time for God's people, I am brought into contact not only with God's consolation, but with God's intimate love for me, for my family and the community of God's children.

God's will and word are so strong and discernable within me at those moments of becoming who I am called to be—a minister of God's love--that it takes my breath away. The miracle of the INCARNATION is to become aware of God's own holiness that lives within every person simply because Jesus Christ came down from heaven, took the form of a slave and in so doing made me, my family, friends, loved ones, the entire human family and all creation an image of his holiness. The only word that suffices is AWE-INSPIRING WONDER!



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Mary Model Disciple
Jesus Christ
Soteriology/Salvation
Incarnation

Liturgical Year
Kingdom of God
Eschatology or the End Times: Heaven,
Hell and Purgatory

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

MARY, MODEL DISCIPLE

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent as Christmas fast approaches the liturgy focuses its attention on the role of Mary, the Mother of God. Isaiah speaks of a virgin who will give birth to a child. Christianity assigns that reference to the person of Mary and the Son of God she would bear. The liturgy anticipates the birth of Christ and the inauguration of God's salvation through his Son Jesus Christ. Mary said "yes" to God's plan. She is a reminder to us that we are all called to be disciples who will say yes when God calls us. Today is an appropriate time to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about MARY, THE MODEL DISCIPLE.

JESUS CHRIST

Matthew's intention in today's Gospel is to affirm our belief in the divine origin of Jesus Christ. Jesus is God's Son. We often see the slogan that Jesus is the reason for the season. Indeed he is. It is thus appropriate on the eve of his incarnation that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about JESUS CHRIST.

SOTERIOLOGY/SALVATION

We are getting closer to the culmination of the most defining moment in salvation history—the Incarnation of Christ. John the Baptist heralded the coming of the Messiah who would usher in God's ultimate saving plan. Today's liturgy is an invitation to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about SOTERIOLOGY/SALVATION

KINGDOM OF GOD

Christ came to restore the harmony of Eden. John the Baptist came to herald Christ. The Baptist preached repentance in preparation for his coming. Advent is a time we imagine that kingdom in which the lion will lay with the lamb and the peace and harmony of the Garden will be restored. Jesus re-established that kingdom and promised that we are

living in its reality. When two or more are gathered in his name that kingdom is established. Advent is an appropriate opportunity to focus our doctrinal session on what the Church teaches about the establishment of the KINGDOM OF GOD.

INCARNATION

Advent prepares for the Incarnation of Christ. Tradition considers the Incarnation to include the entire mystery of Christ—much like the Paschal Mystery. The season of Advent /Christmas heralds, exalts and proclaims the Incarnation. Without it, there would be no death and resurrection and thus, no salvation. The Incarnation is the primary integral event in human history. Advent is an appropriate time to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about the INCARNATION.

LITURGICAL YEAR

We have just begun to celebrate a new liturgical cycle. The entire mystery of Christ unfolds throughout the coming year. It is most appropriate that during the season of Advent we focus our attention on what the Church celebrates in the LITURGICAL YEAR.

ESCHATOLOGY or END TIMES and HEAVEN, HELL AND PURGATORY.

The Scriptures of Advent are alive with cosmic images of last days and end times. Advent is an appropriate time to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about last things. Thus, today our doctrinal session will address ESCHATOLOGY or END TIMES and HEAVEN, HELL AND PURGATORY.